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Foreign-crises panel set up by CIA chief

By CHARLES W. CORDDRY
Washington Bureau of The Sun

Washington—Adm. Stansfield Turner, the director of central intelligence, has established a top-level panel to help improve the assessment of foreign crises, which President Carter found deficient in the Iranian and other recent cases.

Disclosing this development yesterday, a top intelligence official said "predicting political upheavals [like that in Iran] is the hardest part of intelligence work."

The Central Intelligence Agency has been portrayed—wrongly, the official implied—as envisioning no worrisome threats to the shah of Iran at about the time rioting broke out in September.

The official conceded yesterday, however, that intelligence agencies "did not appreciate the extent of what the religious cry could bring" in Iran, although he said it was known from January onward that unrest was spreading.

The unrest traced to reacton of ultra-conservative Shia Muslims to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's liberalizing moves, and then spread to leftists with entirely opposite motives.

In an attempt to improve the gathering and analyzing of information on political crises abroad, Admiral Turner has named a career diplomat, a retired general and a professor to what is known so far only as "the review panel."

The appointees are Ambassador William Leonhart, who has had a 30-year career in the Foreign Service throughout the world and most recently had served as deputy commandant for international affairs at the National War College; Gen. Bruce Palmer, who was the Army vice chief of staff from 1968 to 1973 and has served lately as a defense analyst at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank here, and Klauss E. Knorr, a Princeton University economics professor as well as director of the university's Center for International Studies, and a prolific writer on politico-military issues.

Mr. Leonhart has been at the CIA since July, General Palmer arrived last month, and Mr. Knorr will join the group in January.

The panel's charter is still being written, but the top official said its main task will be to survey continuously the collection and analysis of political intelligence and run up warning signals when some sensitive area is getting too little attention. Iran presumably would have been flagged early on, had the panel been in operation as Admiral Turner intends for it to be in the future.

The top intelligence official indicated he believes the review panel can remain independent and avoid becoming immersed in the system it is to monitor.

The three-man operation is not a direct result of Mr. Carter's annoyance over political intelligence in the Iranian crisis, but it takes on greater importance because of presidential concern. In a memorandum to Admiral Turner, Cyrus R. Vance, the Secretary of State, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, the President's assistant for national security, the President said he was dissatisfied with the "quality" of foreign political intelligence provided him.

When the fact of the President's dissatisfaction was unearthed, it was quickly reported that Senate Intelligence Committee sources had a CIA report indicating, on the eve of rioting, that the shah did not face major threats. One report said the CIA draft did not see Iran as being in a revolutionary "or even pre-revolutionary" situation.

The top official who discussed this yesterday cannot be quoted by name, but clearly his position is not meant to be inimical to Admiral Turner's interests.

He said the document in the hands of Senate aides was three or four months old when it was obtained last summer and was by no means a finished "national intelligence estimate," because it did not bear Admiral Turner's signature.

He said the central intelligence director had in fact twice returned the report to its authors for revision and then had simply killed it when it was overtaken by the September events in Iran.

From that explanation, it would appear that there was no up-to-date CIA estimate available to the President at the time the riots started.

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